

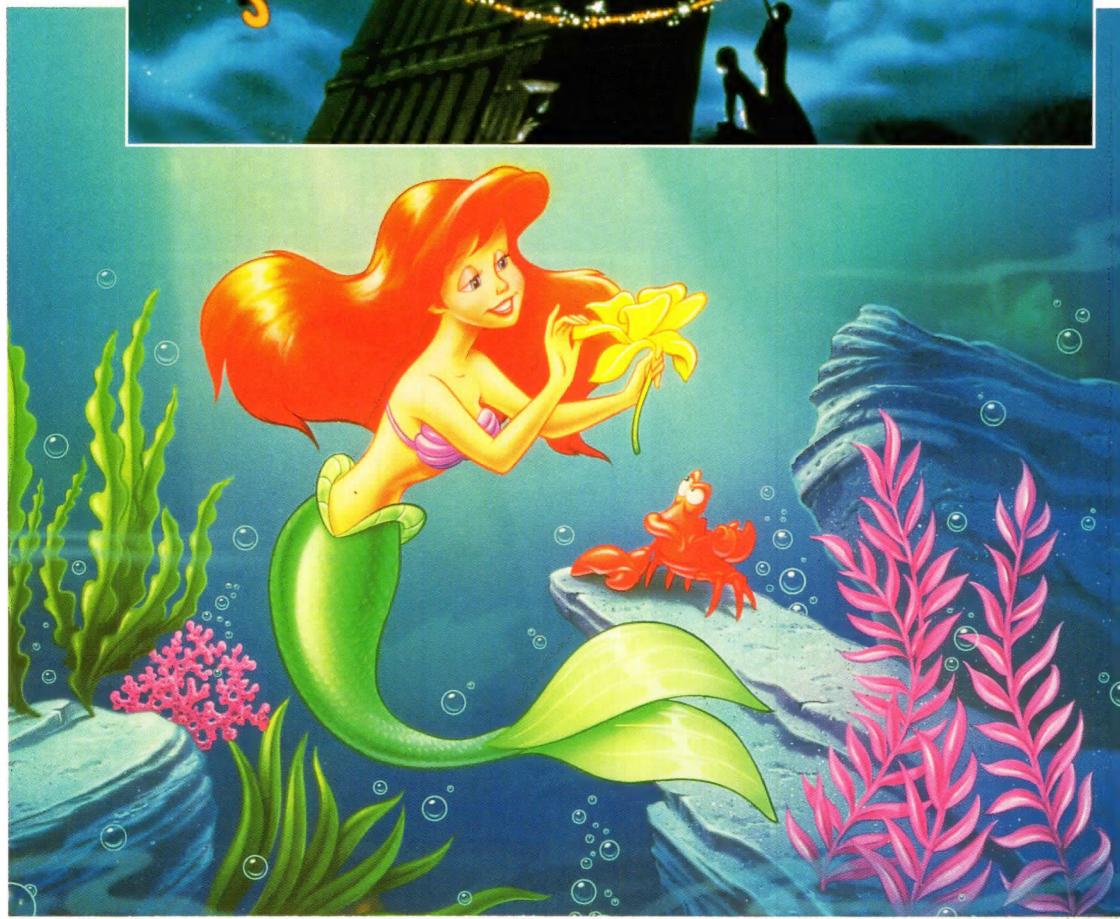
From left to right: Aladdin lamps it up in the most recent Disney film; *Snow White*'s wicked witch — definitely not the fairest of them all; Arthurian legends in *The Sword In The Stone*; taking the mickey out of Sherlock in *Basil, The Great Mouse Detective*; jazzing it up with the bohemian *Aristocats*; recent blockbuster *Beauty And The Beast*, and a mouse about the house in *Fantasia*.



I've got no strings to hold me down... the ever-popular Pinocchio (right), and children's literary classics *Peter Pan* (middle) and *The Little Mermaid* (bottom).

The Wonderful

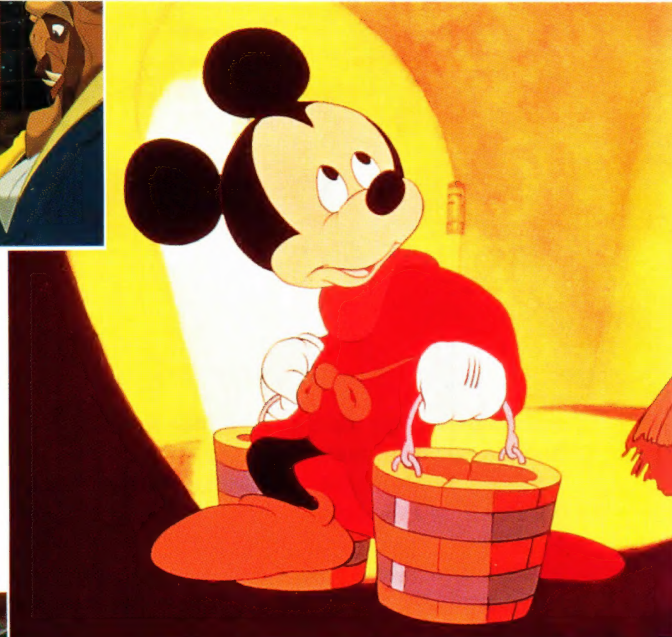
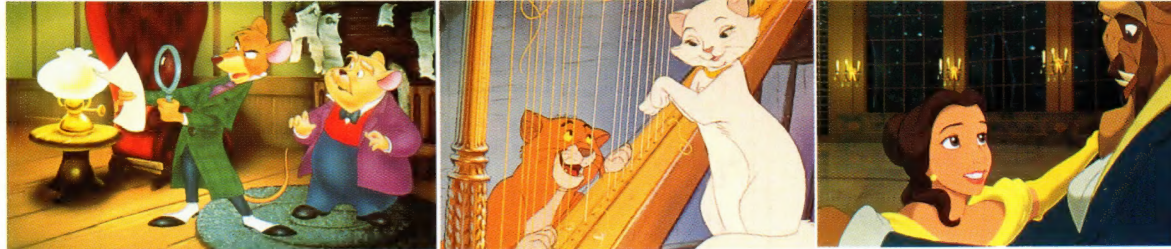
Modern technology has restored Disney to its original beauty — films which first enchanted young and old over 50 years ago. Andrew Osmond looks for the fairest of them all.



On December 21st, 1937, Disney's *Snow White* premiered at the Cathay Circle theatre, Hollywood. The studio was well known for showing Mickey Mouse and the *Silly Symphonies*, quality shorts that had reaped great rewards in the past but whose costs now outstripped their revenue. However, the Hollywood wisdom was that a feature-length cartoon was impossible: people could only be bored by an hour and a half of garish animation.

Not so. Throughout *Snow White* the all-star audience, which included Garland, Chaplin and Dietrich, laughed, cried and cheered, honouring the picture afterward with a standing ovation. The contemporary critics were ecstatic, raving at the stunning draughtsmanship (over 750 artists worked on the film), the vibrant songs, now recognised as classics, and the beautifully crafted characters: romantic lovers, comic dwarfs, and a gloriously wicked witch. From that time on, as rival animator Chuck Jones confessed, 'Everyone in cartoons considered themselves behind Disney'.

When critics refer to the 'golden age' of Disney animation, they usually have the pre-Fifties classics in mind: *Snow White* (1937), *Pinocchio* (1940), *Fantasia* (1940), *Dumbo* (1941) and *Bambi* (1943). Of these, *Pinocchio* is the best. Neatly edited from Collodi's muddled serial, the story of a puppet who longs to be a boy boasted excellent plotting and characterisation, along with the finest artistry in the studio's history. Special mention should be made of Cliff Edwards' performance as Pinocchio's long-suffering mentor Jiminy Cricket, who endowed the film with a solid moral core. *Fantasia*, the studio's attempt to bring culture to the masses, was more of a curate's egg, let down by a mawkish and overlong rendering of the *Pastoral Symphony*. However, other parts more than compensated: Mickey Mouse's legendary performance as The Sorcerer's



World Of Walt



The bear necessities — Baloo and Mogli swinging in *The Jungle Book* (main pic); *Snow White* steps out for her seven vertically challenged friends (right); and, contrary to popular 1977 opinion, *Bambi* wasn't killed, but is alive and kicking in the wonderful world of Disney.



Apprentice, a thrilling portrayal of Mussorgsky's *Night On Bald Mountain*, and a *Jurassic Park*-type interpretation of *The Rite Of Spring*. The anthropomorphic features, *Dumbo* and *Bambi*, both radiated sentiment and charm, though it's debatable which dominated more.

Of these films, only *Snow White* and *Dumbo* performed successfully on first release, the others being killed by poor distribution and World War II. Consequently, the late Forties saw a number of cheap, patchwork films, the most interesting of which was *Song Of The South* (1946), an amiable fantasy inspired by the *Uncle Remus* stories. Combining a live-action framework with cartoon sequences, the film was a model for greater things to come.

Disney returned to the mainstream in 1950 with *Cinderella*, a charming, underrated reworking of the classic fairy tale. Also notable was 1955's *Lady And The Tramp*, a delightful love story about two canines at the turn of the century. Deliberately low-key, the film scored highest on characterisation, with the ani- ►►





imals considerably more human than the humans. Unfortunately, Disney also made an ill-advised foray into English Literature with *Alice In Wonderland* (1951), *Peter Pan* (1953) and *Sword In The Stone* (1963). Though watchable, the trio failed to do their sources any justice, sacrificing subtlety to trite scores and sanitised blandness. *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) was a further disappointment, with gorgeous artistry failing to overcome a stilted, humourless script.

Disney came back on form with *One Hundred And One Dalmations* (1961), a rollicking adventure cum comedy which used a Xerox variant to solve the problem of animating spotty dogs. While the process ruled out the possibility of fine detail in the drawings, the animators compensated by using sharp caricatures and impressionistic backgrounds. Next came the hugely successful Julie Andrews vehicle *Mary Poppins* (1964), which, like *Song Of The South*, combined animation with live action. After that Disney jazzed it up with *The Jungle Book* (1967), where the storyline was secondary to a series of extraordinary, show-stopping song routines, among them Phil Harris' Oscar-nominated *Bear Necessities*, Sterling Holloway's trippy *Trust in Me* and Louis Prima's declaration *I Wanna Be Like You*.

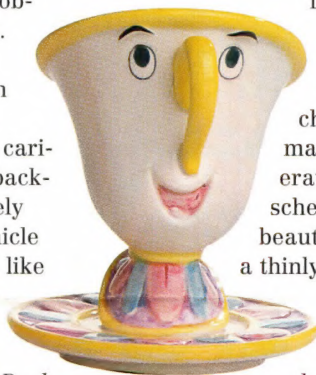
Walt died in 1966, shortly before *Jungle Book's* completion, and for a time

the studio lost direction. *The Aristocats* (1970) was a competent but unadventurous film, importing Phil Harris from *The Jungle Book* to voice O'Malley the alley cat. Harris returned in the anthropomorphic *Robin Hood* (1974), but failed to lift the film above mediocre gaggery and sentiment, while the part-animated *Bedknobs And Broomsticks* (1971) and *Pete's Dragon* (1977) were patchy and overlong. The standards of draughtsmanship were slipping alarmingly, with the animation often lacklustre.

The first signs of improvement came with *The Rescuers* (1977), an unspectacular film that nonetheless marked a return to the storytelling and characterisation that had been lacking. The film also marked a change in personnel as senior animators made way for a younger generation drawn from Disney's training scheme. After *The Rescuers* came the beautifully drawn *Fox And The Hound*, a thinly-disguised parable on racial prejudice, and the ambitious fantasy epic *The Black Cauldron* (1985) which had splendid animation but a topheavy story. *Basil, The Great Mouse Detective* (1986) was a slapdash but highly enjoyable send-up of Sherlock Holmes, with the late Vincent Price as Rattigan, a rodent Moriarty. The film's climax in Big Ben utilised computer animation for a feeling of clockwork precision.

The latest batch of Disney releases began with *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, the most sophisticated mix of toons and live actors yet. The Chandleresque fantasy needed tighter plotting, but the superb effects, inspired script, and impeccable acting from Hoskins and Roger earned it over \$100 million. The same year saw *Oliver And Company*, a conventional but likable animal fantasy which followed *Basil* in using computer effects in several scenes. Then came *The Little Mermaid* (1989), a return to Disney's fairy-tale roots and one of the studio's best: solid pacing, excellent characters and a fine score by Disney newcomers Ashman and Menken combined to make it a box-office hit.

In 1990 Disney introduced its first cartoon sequel, *The Rescuers Down Under* (1990), which took the mouse duo into Indiana Jones territory. Some of the animation was stunning, particularly an early scene with a giant eagle, but the film was hampered by poorly constructed plotting



Five lovable good guys

1 Baloo (The Jungle Book)

The 'jungle bum' who captured the hearts of millions.

2 Thumper (Bambi)

Disney cuteness at its most insufferable.

3 The Genie (Aladdin)

Less a character than a stream of consciousness.

4 The Mice (Cinderella)

Cinderella's brilliantly conceived band of rodent helpers.

5 Lumiere (Beauty and the Beast)

Only Disney could turn Chevalier into a candlestick.



Five most dastardly villains

1 The Queen/Witch (Snow White)

Beauty or hag, she steals the show.

2 Chernaborg The Demon (Fantasia)

The terrifying Beast Of Bald Mountain

3 The Crocodile (Peter Pan)

All he wanted was a taste of Hook...

4 Ursula The Sea Witch (The Little Mermaid)

An octopoid, soul-stealing grotesque.

5 J. Worthington Foulfellow (Pinocchio)

Foxy con-man. Hey diddle dee, an actor's life for me...



that never got off the ground. The Broadway-styled *Beauty And The Beast* (1991) broke box-office records, taking \$115 million in the US alone and being Oscar-nominated for Best Picture. The central romance was poignant and charming, the songs recalled Disney at its most spectacular and the animation exquisite, with a jaw-dropping 3D ballroom courtesy of the very latest computer animation gadgetry.

Most recently, *Aladdin* (1992) was released in the UK late last year, and takings of over £200 million made it the biggest grossing cartoon ever. By now the computer technology could simulate effects worthy of a Spielberg epic, including a rollercoaster carpet ride through lava-filled caverns. However, Robin Williams stole the show as a manic Genie whose routines were matched only by the fluid, anarchic animation. Proof that Disney has regained that magic touch.

Five most memorable Disney tunes

1 When You Wish Upon A Star (Pinocchio, Cliff Edwards)

The definitive Disney theme song.

2 I Wanna Be Like You (Jungle Book, Louis Prima and Phil Harris)

First class scat from the swingers.

3 Why Should I Worry? (Oliver and Company, Billy Joel)

Toe-tapping number from the pop star.

4 He's A Tramp (Lady & The Tramp, Peggy Lee)

The ultimate canine character assassination.

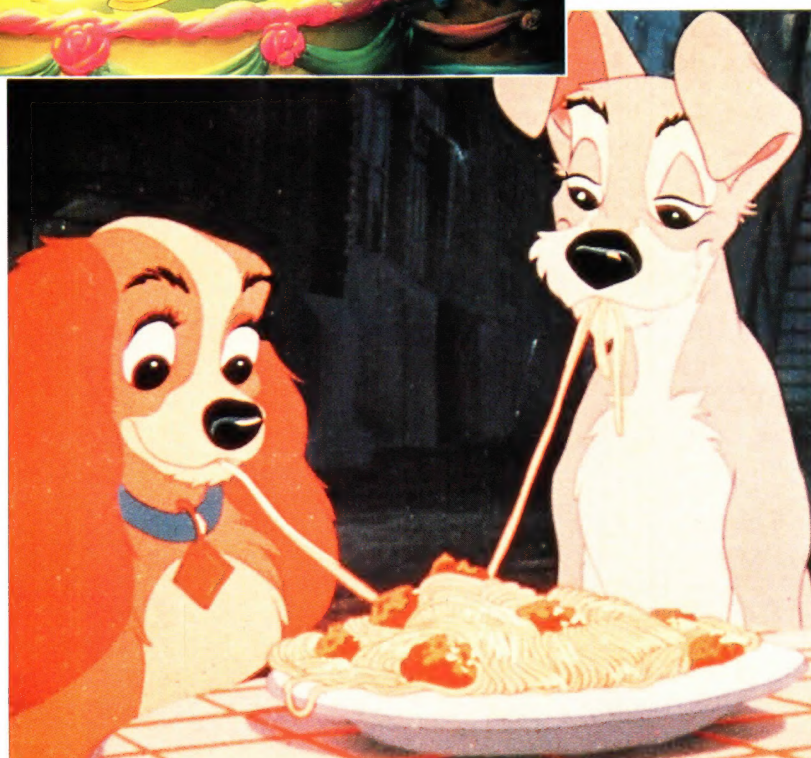
5 Be Our Guest (Beauty And The Beast, Jerry Orbach)

Lumiere's spectacular Broadway pastiche.





I've never seen an elephant fly — Dumbo does the unthinkable (above). Come to that, I've never seen a candlestick dance, but Lumiere does a great Chevalier impression (left). Meanwhile The Lady and The Tramp get stuck into a real dog's dinner.



Disney for sale

Disney home viewing began as early as 1954 with a TV screening of *Alice In Wonderland*, but the studio was wary of the video age. If cartoon films were released on tape, it argued, why should the public bother with reissues in the cinema? Nevertheless, in 1985 Buena Vista released *Pinocchio*, arguably the greatest cartoon ever made, onto US video for a limited period. Its success led to others following, and today nearly all the Disney canon is available in the UK. (The exceptions are *The Aristocats*, currently on theatrical re-release, *One Hundred And One Dalmations*, *The Fox And The Hound*, *The Black Cauldron* and *Oliver And Company*. *Snow White* and *Aladdin* will be launched this autumn).

Many of these titles have broken industrial records. *Beauty And The Beast*, for example, sold 2.5 million copies in the last quarter, while the much-hyped *Fantasia* topped three million. Perhaps the most remarkable success story of all is that of *Jungle Book*, which has shifted 4.3 million copies since its launch last Christmas. (That represents a third of UK video owners!) TV exposure and shopping displays go some way toward explaining these figures, but even so the public's affection for classic Disney is clear. Buena Vista has even released 'deluxe' editions of *Beauty* and *The Jungle Book* for collectors, selling for around £40 each. As well as the films, the packages contain commemorative lithographs, soundtrack CDs, and, in *Beauty's* case, a fascinating 'work-in-progress' video showing what the film was like mid-production. At the same time, accusations of poor quality in early titles have led to a search for more accurate restorations, of which *Fantasia* and *Snow White* are the best known.

So is Disney finally selling its family silver? Not at all, claim Buena Vista. Most of the videos are on 'Limited Release Only', with cut-off dates beyond which new copies cannot be ordered from the stockists. The idea is that the titles will eventually enter a cycle of roughly seven years, supplementing rather than replacing the cinema reissues. (*Pinocchio* was re-screened in American cinemas in 1991.) In this way, Disney hopes to capture each upcoming generation. In the meantime, most of the British videos can be unearthed with a little search, but titles like *Fantasia* and *Pinocchio* are becoming increasingly rare. If you haven't got them, buy now!



It's a jungle out there for Disney collectors.